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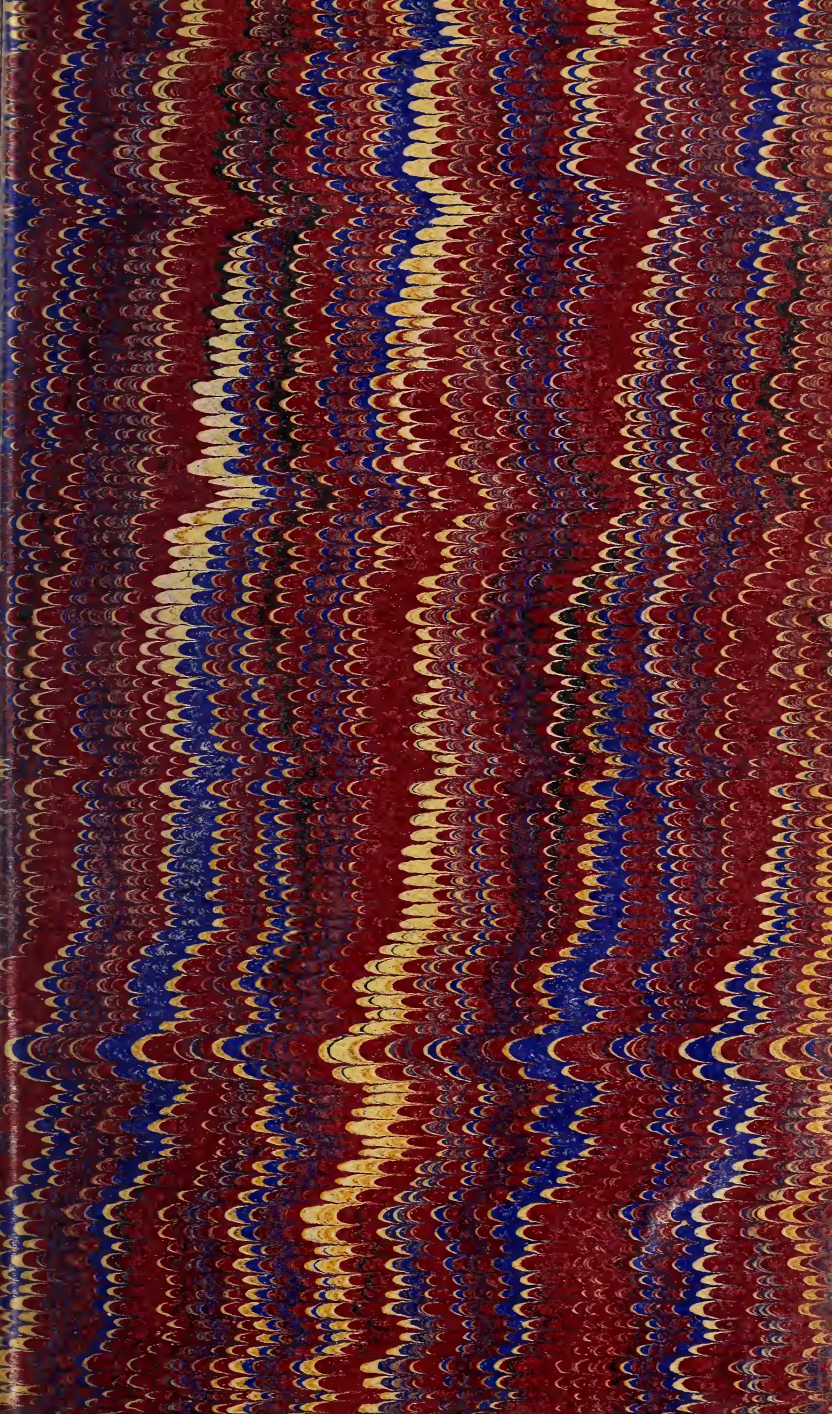
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THE  
OFFICE OF REASON  
IN  
RELIGION.



By JOHN CLARKE, D. D.

MINISTER OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN BOSTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS,

*And Author of the "Answer to the Question,  
Why are you a Christian?"*

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Reason is the glory of human nature.—The power of Reasoning was given us by our maker for this very end, *to pursue truth.* DR. WATTS.

On argument alone my faith is built;  
Fond as we are, and justly fond of *faith*,  
*Reason*, we grant, demands our first regard;  
*Reason* the root, fair *faith* is but the flower;  
The fading flower shall die; but *reason* lives  
Immortal, as her father in the skies:  
When *faith* is virtue, *reason* makes it so.  
Through *reason's* wounds alone, thy *faith* can die.

DR. YOUNG.

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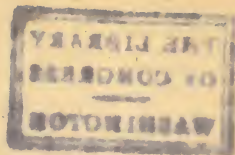
ADVERTISEMENT.



The following little piece is extracted from a sermon published in America. Dr. Clarke was a person of great industry, learning, and purity of character. His answer to the question, "Why are you a Christian?" is highly, and justly esteemed, by all who are acquainted with it. No apology can be necessary for publishing the following pages, at a time when the systems of our fathers are made to pass in review before us; and when some very good persons, from a mistaken zeal in the cause of religion, decry human reason, and represent it as highly pernicious to the cause of Christianity. The great founder of our religion never called for implicit faith. The apostles, following the steps of their master, invited others to prove all things, to examine and judge for themselves; the *Bereans* followed this advice, and are highly commended for their conduct. Reader, imitate their example

F. B. W.

Liverpool Sept. 3, 1808.



## OFFICE OF REASON, &c.

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### I. CORINTHIANS, X. 15.

*I speak as unto wise men, judge ye.*

THE apostle Paul, as he had been the instrument of converting the Corinthians, felt a generous concern to preserve them in the faith and purity of the gospel. Having been formerly a lewd, luxurious, and vicious people, he knew they were in great danger of relapsing into their early habits. This he might have inferred from the established laws of the human constitution. But the matter was put beyond all doubt, by the disorders which prevailed in the Corinthian church, not many years after its establishment. In the first place it was disturbed by parties and factions: in the next, it cherished in its bosom a notorious offender, who had been guilty of incest. A covetous and litigious temper had likewise discovered itself in that church. And finally, they had made some approaches towards idolatry, by turning the Lord's supper into an intemperate revel.

To impress them with their sinful deviations from Christian duty, and to excite within them a just sense

of their danger, the apostle addresses these faulty Corinthians in the following words, "*Wherefore my dearly beloved brethren, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men, judge ye.*" That is, I have been faithfully setting before you the errors into which you have fallen ; and the guilt which you may still farther contract. Particularly have I admonished you against all those idolatrous practises, to which you were accustomed in your heathen state. Let me now repeat the admonition. As you regard the honor of your religion, the favor of God, and the future salvation of your souls, flee from all approaches towards idolatry. I now speak as unto wise men. I address myself to those, who have had an opportunity to inform themselves on the subject. I call upon you to examine the matter with due attention. And I refer it to your own cooler, and more deliberate thoughts, whether there be not reason in what I have advanced. In this manner, I have no doubt, the apostle Paul meant to express himself ; and that the Corinthians so understood him, there is every reason to believe.

But without confining these words to the early christians, they may be considered as applicable to men in the present day. It is the duty of every man to make use of that portion of reason which God has given him. When we go to our bibles, we must take our understandings with us ; we must make them our guide, when we weigh the evidence of christianity ; we must employ them to ascertain the meaning of the scriptures. In order to perceive the excellency, use, and beauty of divine revelation, we must have recourse to this faculty. And we must so far reverence the authority of reason, as to admit no doctrine to be divine, which is directly contrary to its intuitive perceptions. Of the truth of these positions I feel the fullest



conviction. And that the apostles had the like conviction is manifest from the following passages ; “ Prove all things ; search the scriptures : be ready to give an answer to every man, that asketh a reason of the hope that is in us ; in understanding be men.” All these directions suppose that reason is a very important faculty ; and that it ought to be exercised on subjects of religion.

My design is to point out the proper office of reason so far as religion and revelation are concerned. And, first, as christians we should exercise our understanding upon the evidence of the gospel : otherwise, how should we be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. To say that we were born and educated christians, will not satisfy every enquirer. To say that we *feel* our religion to be true, will be considered rather as a flight of enthusiasm than as a sober argument. There is no other way to satisfy others, and to discharge our duty to ourselves, than by the application of our reasoning faculty to the internal and external evidences on which christianity rests.

It is argued in favor of the christian religion, that it bears internal marks of the truth. One office of reason, then, is to examine this argument. We should repair to the writings of the evangelists and apostles, and should seriously consider whether the account which they give of Jesus Christ, his moral character, his doctrines and laws, his promises, discoveries, and his fate, be consistent with itself : whether his representations of God accord with our natural apprehensions of the supreme being ; whether his delineations of duty consist with our internal sense of right and wrong : whether, in a word, the actions and discourses, ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth, appear to be worthy of one bearing a

divine message to the children of men. These are points of importance; and they may very properly be brought to the bar of reason. It is her business to view the subject on all sides. And it is her decision that should determine us to embrace the gospel, and to reject those systems of faith which are inconsistent with her dictates.

Another argument in favor of Christianity, is derived from the accomplishment of prophecy. To determine the strength of this argument is likewise the province of reason: that is, we must make use of our understanding to select the predictions, which are supposed to refer to Jesus Christ, and to see whether the reference be just. Thus did the noble Bereans, and they are commended for so doing. For their own satisfaction, they searched the scriptures: they reviewed the prophecies, which had been referred to by the apostles, With them they compared the accounts, which they had received respecting Jesus Christ; and they examined carefully and critically, whether there was a correspondence of the prediction and event. This was making a proper use of their rational powers; they behaved like wise men; and their example is well worthy our imitation.

Again Christianity, rests on the evidence of miracles. It is the office of reason to examine the nature of those miracles; their more immediate occasion; the circumstances attending them; the impression they made upon spectators; and to ascertain the precise weight of evidence arising from this source. Unless we have reason to recur to in this case, how are we to distinguish the wonderful works which are produced in attestation of the gospel from the tricks of an impostor. Is it not then a mark of the utmost weakness to under-

value the faculty of reason? Is it not manifestly wrong to exclude it from the concerns of religion? Do we not shake the foundation of the christian faith, in proportion as we ascribe weakness and error to the human understanding.

If reason be an uncertain guide, its authority suspicious, and its province far remote from religious speculations, then, among all the religions which prevail in the world, no man could have any just ground of preference. Whether he were a Jew, Pagan, Mahometan, or Christian, he would act with equal wisdom. But the case would be far otherwise, might reason be called in. The different religions in the world being submitted to the sober examination of this faculty, he might with great propriety, make a choice among them; and might justify his choice by convincing arguments. Because reason pointed out its impiety and absurdity, he might reject Paganism. Because the same divine records which furnish the origin of Judaism, furnish reasons to believe that it is superseded by Christianity, he might reject the Mosaic institution. And he might be led to prefer the Gospel to the Koran, by comparing the respective characters of Jesus and Mahomet; the doctrines which they taught; the rules which they prescribed; and the measures to which they had recourse, in order to propagate their religions. In this manner would reason come to the aid of truth; and so far from being hostile to the Christian faith, it would furnish the only sure and stable foundation for believing.

What has been said on this head will sufficiently show the use of reason in discovering the essential marks of a divine revelation, and the evidence necessary to support it: and it is the business of every one to exercise his understanding on this subject. This

faculty was bestowed upon us for wise and benevolent purposes. *The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord* ; and if we keep this light trimmed and burning, we shall make a just return to God, from whom we received it, and we shall do honor to ourselves. Its friendly rays will preserve us from enthusiasm on the one hand, and infidelity on the other : and we shall never be without a substantial reason for the faith which is in us, so long as we receive the gospel with the temper of wise men, and calmly examine its evidence.

But farther, it is the office of reason not only to examine the grounds upon which divine revelation claims our assent, but also to judge of its sense. How are we to know the meaning of the gospel, but by the exercise of our understandings. A book is put into our hands, containing many important doctrines, many useful precepts, many interesting discoveries : it is written in an ancient language ; and has many allusions to ancient customs and usages. The stile of this book is also in many places, highly figurative ; and it contains principles, some of which are capable of a general application, and others peculiar to the age in which the volume was written. Into what absurdities, then, must every one fall, who repairs to the sacred scriptures, without taking reason with him as a guide.

In the first place, he must run into endless errors in respect to the doctrines of revelation. Many of those doctrines are expressed in figurative terms. Some, which relate to God ; some which relate to Jesus Christ ; some which respect futurity ; are conceived in terms, which though perfectly agreeable to the genius of the eastern languages, appear almost extravagant to a modern ear. What would not a man receive as divine truth, who



should refuse to listen to reason, and should reject her comments upon these passages? What enthusiastic principles would he not find in his bible? What wild extravagances would he not build on a perverted scripture?

In regard to God, he would ascribe to that infinitely pure and amiable being, both human parts, and human passions. For we read of the eyes, the face, the ears, the voice, and the hand of God: we read of his wrath, his pity, his grief, and his repentings. Sometimes God is styled love, sometimes light, and sometimes a consuming fire. These expressions can mislead none who exercise their reason. That spirit which is in man, will always help him to the true sense of these passages: and he who makes a proper use of his understanding, will infer nothing from them, which is not strictly applicable to the divine character.

Again, Jesus Christ is often described in language as highly figurative. He says of himself, *I am the vine—I am the door—I am the good shepherd—I am the resurrection, and the life—I am the way and the truth—I am the light of the world.* And the apostles style him *a lamb—a rock—the day star*, and the like. Strong and bold as these figures are, they lead us into no mistake respecting Jesus Christ. Reason dictates in what manner they are to be understood and applied.

But, rejecting reason, should we interpret these expressions literally, how should we dishonor Jesus Christ, and disgrace revelation? What absurdities should we impute to the christian system? And how should we insult and disgust the common sense of mankind? The consequences of refusing reason its authority, will be manifest at once by a reference to a passage of scripture on an important and interesting oc-

casion. The same night in which Jesus was betrayed, we read, Matt. xxvi. 26. *He took bread, brake it, and said, THIS IS MY BODY.* If we take these words literally, as some have done, we must admit that Jesus Christ, whilst he was alive and familiarly talking with his disciples, took his *own body* and brake it, and exhorted them to eat of it. So likewise he called the wine at his supper his blood. Matt. xxvi. 27, 28. *And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, drink ye all of it, for THIS IS MY BLOOD, &c. &c.* Let reason perform its office here, and we shall not be at a loss to form a right opinion on this subject.

But the doctrines of revelation are not the only points upon which the understanding should be employed. We must call in the aid of reason, in order to ascertain the meaning of its precepts. Some of the rules, which we find in the New Testament, do not bind the present age. Others are of lasting obligation. Some are conveyed in figurative, others in plain language. How then are we to distinguish, but by the sober exercise of the understanding? Jesus Christ told his disciples, if they were "smitten on one cheek, to turn the other." Reason tells us this is a figurative expression, and that it means nothing more, than that there are times when it would be more prudent, more politic, more amiable, and in every point of view, better to submit to the repetition of an injury, than to have recourse even to legal measures, in order to obtain redress. Again, our Savior, in a manner directs us *to hate our father, mother, wife, and children*; reason tells us that, strong as these expressions may seem, they can imply no more than that we should love our earthly connexions in a less degree than we love Jesus Christ. Again the apostle Paul delivers many sentiments on the subjects of dress, marriage, and the use of meats,

which though pertinent in his day, do not apply to ours. Reason tells us to consider such directions as particular rules, which ought to be regarded, rather as articles of history, than matters of practice.

From the instances now produced, we must be convinced of the use and offices of reason in our religious enquiries and studies. The Son of God addresses us as rational beings, and we should judge what he says, we should employ our reasoning faculty upon the evidences of his mission ; we should have recourse to it in order to ascertain what he has taught, and what he would have us to do. In stating the motives of religion, we should make use of our understandings : by their aid, and under their direction, we should separate figures from plain speech ; we should compare present and past times ; should contrast modern and ancient customs ; and should compare scripture with scripture. This is our duty ; and to discharge this duty, our reason must be set to work.

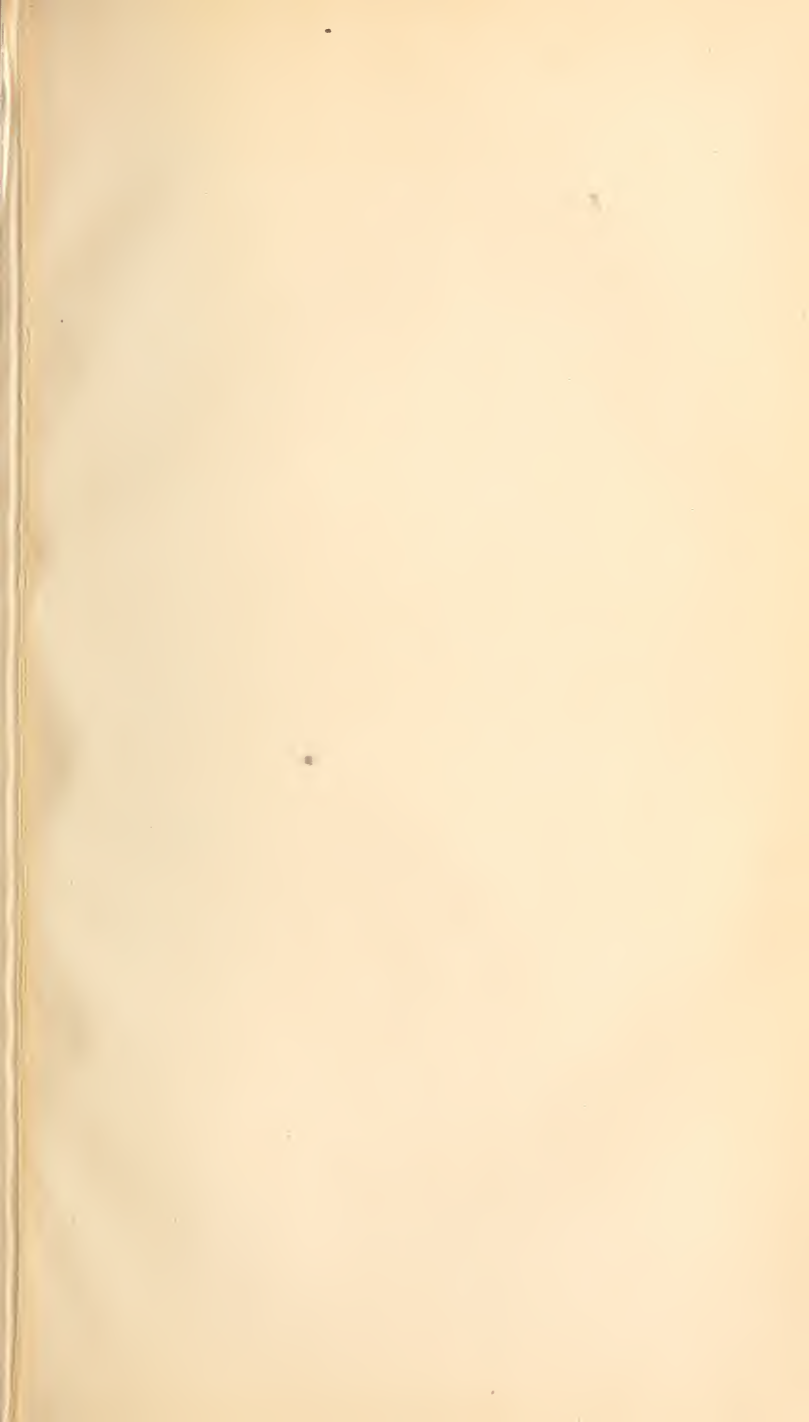
Let me persuade you to study the scriptures as rational beings. A rational christian is the most exalted character any man can sustain. To know what we believe, and upon what grounds we yield our assent ; to be able to give a reason why we are Christians, rather than Jews, Mahometans, or Heathens ; and to be furnished with a ready answer to those who may enquire why we are of this religious denomination, rather than any other ; these certainly are most desirable attainments. And to be able thus far to justify his religious peculiarities, every man ought to be solicitous.

Be persuaded, then, to read, examine and reflect. Under this impression, that faith and reason cannot be at variance, make all possible use of the latter, in order

to settle the grounds of the former. Always regard the gospel as a reasonable institution ; and your duty as a reasonable service. Prove all things ; examine all opinions ; and compare all parts of the sacred volume. Whatever you hear, like the justly commended Bereans, search the scriptures ; and see whether they speak the same language. In a word, as christians, and in understanding be men. Thus, sober and inquisitive, you may expect a divine blessing. Thus will you be able to judge rightly. Your ideas of the Supreme Being, of Jesus Christ, and the gospel salvation, will do honor to your understandings, and your temper and lives, regulated by the precepts of the great teacher of christianity, will do honor to your hearts. Your religion will be of the rational kind, which all, who reflect, must admire. Instead of bewildering yourselves with mysteries, you will modestly dismiss what you cannot comprehend. And instead of placing your religion in rites and forms, it will be your principal concern, to "*do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.*" Such will be the happy consequences of applying to yourselves those words of the apostle : "*I speak as to wise men, judge ye what I say.*"
















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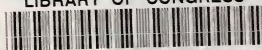
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